



U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

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Senate Appropriations Committee Approves Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Bill

Full Committee Mark

Washington, D.C... The Senate Appropriations Committee today approved Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations legislation that makes good on America's commitment to those who served our country in uniform by making substantial investments in veterans' health care and funding cutting-edge medical research specifically geared to the needs of combat veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The legislation also provides funding for military construction and family housing, services for women veterans, and increased mileage reimbursements for veterans who must travel long distances to access VA Medical Centers. Overall, the bill provides \$73 billion in discretionary funding, which is \$3.65 billion above the President's budget request.

"The Administration has consistently failed to address the needs of our nation's veterans. This Congress, as evidenced by this legislation, understands that we have a moral responsibility to provide the best possible care for those who have put their lives on the line for our country. I thank Chairman Johnson and the members of the committee for their excellent work in crafting legislation that does right by America's veterans and military families," said U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"I'm tired of veterans getting the short end of the stick. Patriotism is more than saluting the flag, it is also supporting the troops by honoring the promises we made to them. In this bill, we've reversed the President's proposal to underfund the VA and make sure that our military installations have the funding they need to do the job. I want to thank Chairman Byrd for making this bill a priority," said U.S. Senator Tim Johnson, D-SD, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs.

FY 2009 MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS SUMMARY

Total Discretionary Funding

Committee Mark: \$73 billion, \$3.65 billion above the President's budget request.

Department of Veterans Affairs

Discretionary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs totals \$48 billion, of which \$41.1 billion (85%) is for VA health care, including medical services, facility maintenance, and research.

Major Funding Programs and Initiatives

- **VA Rural Health Initiative** –The bill includes \$250 million to initiate a new health outreach program for veterans in rural America. The VA estimates that almost 38% of its current enrollees live in rural or highly rural areas. The goal of this initiative is to bring world class health care to the doorsteps of veterans across rural America via an array of outreach options including mobile clinics, telemedicine, outpatient clinics, expanded fee-based care in remote areas, and collaboration with other health care providers, such as community mental health centers or the Indian Health Service.
- **VA Major Construction** – The bill more than doubles funding for VA hospital and clinic construction, increasing the budget request by \$636 million for a total of \$1.2 billion. VA's 5 year construction forecast identifies a requirement of more than \$5.5 billion for major medical facility construction, including new VA hospitals and clinics, yet the President's budget request provides only \$397.6 million for the Veterans Health Administration construction requirements.
- **Upkeep and Repair** -- The latest Facilities Condition Assessment issued by the VA indentified almost \$6 billion worth of code violations at existing VA facilities. To assist in correcting these deficiencies, the bill includes \$1.1 billion, \$300 million above the President's budget request, in maintenance funding to assist the Department in correcting these violations. The bill also includes an additional \$400 million in minor construction to update and modernize hospitals and clinics.
- **Priority 8 veterans** – In recognition of the severe hardships caused by the current economic downturn, the recommendation provides \$350 million for the VA to incrementally increase the current income threshold for Priority 8 veterans to allow more veterans to use the VA health care system.
- **Mileage Reimbursement** – Many veterans must travel long distances to VA medical centers to receive treatment, yet the mileage reimbursement for VA beneficiaries has been held artificially low. The bill provides sufficient funding (\$138 million) to allow the VA to raise the mileage reimburse for veterans to 50.5 cents per mile, the GSA approved rate.

- **Medical and Prosthetic Research** – The bill increases the budget for VA research to \$526.8 million, \$84 million above the President’s budget request. This funding is used for a wide range of research activities targeted to the veteran population, including mental health, post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, polytraumatic physical injuries, and sensory disabilities, including hearing and vision loss. Much of the research funded by this account is focused on the new types of physical and emotional wounds suffered by combat veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.
- **Services for Women Veterans** – The number of women veterans receiving care from the VA is expected to double in the next five years, with women combat veterans expected to make up a large portion of the increase. The bill, therefore, provides an additional \$5 million for outreach and transitional assistance to women veterans.

Military Construction, Family Housing, and BRAC: \$24.7 billion, \$344 million above the President’s budget request.

Energy Conservation Investment Program: \$160 million, \$80 million over the President’s budget request.

“Grow the Force” Initiative

The committee fully funds the “Grow the Force” initiative for facilities needed to accommodate the planned 92,000 member increase in end strength of the Army and Marine Corps.

Guard and Reserve Facilities: \$1.3 billion, \$356 million over the President’s budget request.

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